SOCIETY OF AMERICAN ARCHIVISTS

Congressional Papers Roundtable Newsletter

November 1998

Table of Contents

Congressional Papers Roundtable Minutes
1998 Annual Meeting
Orlando, September 4

(Ed. Note: These minutes will be reproduced in the next print edition of the CPR Newsletter, to be distributed in Feb. 1999.)

Mark Greene (Minnesota Historical Society), CPR chair for 1997-1998, called the meeting to order. He then introduced Naomi Nelson (Emory University) and Beth Bensman (Thomas Jefferson University), who made a presentation on electronic records in congressional offices.

Nelson began by describing the types of electronic documents that could be found in a congressional office as it closes. These include various standard office software files, such word processing files, spreadsheets, and databases; email; voting and legislative databases or CD-ROMs; reference materials on CD-ROM; campaign donor lists; correspondence management systems (CMS); photo CDs; and digitization and indexing projects. She then provided suggestions on electronic records appraisal. Archivists may want to retain data files from the local area network (LAN) because they provide a snapshot of the office as well as sampling of the kind of files created. She recommended maintaining the data structure, keeping different files separate from each other, converting nonproprietary formats if possible, and keeping good documentation of software used in the office. Nelson also talked about retaining CMS, email, imaging and indexing files, as well as campaign contributor databases.

Nelson listed questions to ask the congressional office staff and concerns for the repository to consider. The archivist collecting electronic records should inquire about the types of hardware used, types of software, how staffers stored files, when the system administrator will be leaving her/his position and how she/he can be contacted afterwards, and can the office send a preliminary set of files to test the archive's ability to access the records. The archives must also resolve another set of questions: is the information contained within electronic records significant enough to retain? is the format/interface of integral value to the information? what resources does the repository have to use for working with electronic files, what formats can the repository access? and what size of files can the repository's hardware and software handle?

For CMS files, Nelson presented a retirement checklist files that covered system documentation, office procedure documentation, and information from the Senate Computer Center or the House Information Service. System documentation should include the name of the system(s), the date the system was adopted, indication of switches from previous systems, manuals for the system(s), information on file formats and data storage, and a list of reports generated and who received them. Office documentation should have topic/subtopic lists, mail handling procedures manuals (showing how the system was used), item libraries, a list of staff members responsible, and procedures for purging or downloading files from the system. The archivist should contact the Senate or House systems offices to determine if they have the member's electronic files, if they are planning to send anything to the repository, and if they know what was done concerning electronic records in the member's office.

Nelson talked about the data specifications for receiving electronic records. She recommended the greatest granularity (number of fields) as possible. She also recommended that data from different systems be put on different files. Finally, she recommended that data be sent in ASCII and fixed-field format and on CD-ROM or some other storage medium that the repository can read.

Beth Bensman then discussed different types of electronic records that can be found in members papers and their continuing viability. Punch cards and seven-track tapes from the 1960s are now obsolete, as is paper tape from the 1970s. Tape cassettes and nine-track tapes from the 1970s can still be read if they are 1600 bpi. Compact disks, floppy disks, and data tape cartridges from the 1980s and 1990s can still be read.

Because of the large file size, a repository may have to transfer data to the mainframe of the parent university in order to work with it. First, the archivist should move the data to a more stable medium. Next, she/he needs to reformat the data. Third, she/he must determine whether to save the data in ASCII delimited or fixed-field format. Delimited format will expand or contract as needed and is an advantage for storage. Finally, the archivist should create an archival copy containing the reformatted data.

In terms of accessing data, Bensman said data should be copied to read-only CD-ROMs for research use. She also touched on using statistical analysis software to re-sequence data, and the need to decide between SPSS and SAS statistical analysis packages.

Nelson then brought up the issue of data irregularities. These can affect whether or not the information can be used. Problems include variant spellings (such as use of "case" and "casework" within a single database) and incorrect addresses. Also, data may have been entered in wrong fields or even deleted. She has discovered sometimes that the electronic record may be only an index to paper records.

Bensman then talked about research use of congressional office electronic records. Anticipated research use includes surveying constituent requests for casework, comparing constituent correspondence and media coverage, examining the politician's stance in relation to constituent correspondence, track changes in the politician's point of view, and theories or representation (who contacts representatives between elections). Privacy issues are a concern with use because the data contains names and addresses of constituents and the files are fairly recent. Options are to either filter data or to have the user sign a consent form indicating that names will not be published.

Nelson and Bensman concluded by stating that electronic records must be taken care of soon after arrival at the repository or else it may be too late. The biggest unknowns are their usefulness and the costs involved in storing and maintaining. (Outlines of the presentation may be obtained from Naomi Nelson and Beth Bensman).

After the conclusion of Nelson and Bensman's presentation, the CPR business meeting began with the introduction of the Steering Committee. Then Nelson and Jim Cartwright (University of Hawaii at Manoa) conducted the election of new CPR officers. Candidates were, for vice chair: Pam Hackbart-Dean (University of Georgia) and Ed Galloway (Carnegie-Mellon University); for Steering Committee: Glenda Stevens (Texas Christian University), Jeff Suchanek (University of Kentucky), Christopher Beam (Bates

College), Nancy Turner (retired from Ball State University), Saundra Taylor (Indiana University), and Brian Williams (University of Michigan). Twenty-six ballots were cast, and the winners were Hackbart-Dean, Stevens, Suchanek, and Williams. (See below for a list of 1998-1999 officers.)

The next order of business was revision of the bylaws. The idea for revising the bylaws arose last winter with the uncertainty of the future of the professional archival position in the U. S. House Clerk's Office. According to the bylaws, this person is an ex officio member of the roundtable; therefore, changes to the bylaws were thought necessary. Greene announced, however, that the Steering Committee was unable to propose any revisions so none were recommended to the membership. CPR members interested in reviewing the bylaws can find them in the March 1996 newsletter or at the Web site http://www.lib.udel.edu/ud/spec/cpr/bylaws.htm.

Next, roundtable members discussed the need for a survey of preservation/conservation needs with congressional papers. A draft of the survey was distributed, and members were asked to provide feedback by September 30 to Greene or Suchanek. Ben Primer (Princeton University) asked about the intended function of the survey, and Greene responded that the Steering Committee wanted to determine if congressional papers are treated differently or have different problems than other collections. Suchanek, who had initiated the issue of a survey over the summer, said that his repository at the University of Kentucky has a new library building but the political collections are slated to be housed in the old library. He wanted to compare Kentucky's preservation/conservation treatment of its political collections with that of other repositories, and he hoped to do so in a national survey. Various concerns were raised by the membership on the length of the survey, the usefulness of information that it would provide, the funding for distribution, the application to closed collections. Karyl Winn (University of Washington) indicated that the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) was conducting a similar survey, and there was discussion as to whether or not the CPR survey should be tied to that one. The survey will probably be distributed to CPR members through the newsletter in 1999.

Also discussed was a proposed survey of electronic records in congressional papers. No draft was ready for the membership to review. The idea was raised of having a forum on electronic records at a future SAA meeting. There was general agreement that CPR members would be able to spend an extra day at an SAA meeting in order to attend such a forum.

Herb Hartsook (University of South Carolina) reported on the CPR workshop. He stated that the one in May in Atlanta was the best yet. Attendance was good. A number of archival administrators attended. Attendees came from a broad geographic range. SAA has no real interest in the workshop anymore, so CPR has free reign on where and when to offer it. The idea of offering it next year in California was raised. Also, it was stated that the workshop would be held at MARAC meeting in 2000. Any person or group interested in cosponsoring the workshop should contact Hartsook.

Additional announcements: Leah Uhre (U. S. House Clerk's Office) announced that Cynthia Pease Miller was working on a Web site that merges the BIOGRAPHICAL DIRECTORY OF THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS with A GUIDE TO RESEARCH COLLECTIONS OF FORMER MEMBERS OF THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES and a selected bibliography of publications by and about members. Mike McReynolds (National Archives) said OUR MOTHERS BEFORE US: WOMEN AND DEMOCRACY, 1789-1920, a documentary source book of petitions to Congress from women and women's groups, is available for $55.95 plus $5.00 shipping. He then asked if members were interested in the Center for Legislative Archives establishing a clearinghouse of all congressional oral history; there was general agreement. Burt Altman (Florida State University) indicated that the Claude Pepper Library received funding to create a Web site for finding aids to and digital images from the papers of Rep. Claude Pepper (D-FL). Sheryl Vogt (University of Georgia) announced that the published guide to the Richard Russell (D-GA) papers had been distributed but copies were still available. Bryan Culp of the Robert Dole Archives (University of Kansas) introduced himself. Ed Galloway (Carnegie-Mellon University) discussed the HELIOS project. He said the Web site now gets 100 hits per month. He also commented that it cost $417 per c. f. to process and convert the collection to electronic format. Processing has reduced the original 1200 c. f. Sen. John J. Heinz Collection to 588 c. f. Three-fourths, or about 425 boxes, will be converted to

electronic format when the project is completed. Greene commented that the Minnesota Historical Society has been approached by three congressional offices who believe that donating a collection with restrictions can be taxed because it is not considered a charitable donation. None of the membership had heard of such before, and the general consensus was that members donating collections could not be taxed.

The meeting was then adjourned.

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